DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 397 417 CS 215 423

AUTHOR Melcher, Jamey W.
TITLE Cooperative Learning Strategy as Success Variable in Secondary English Instruction: A Review of Recent Literature.
PUB DATE [96]
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; *Cooperative Learning; *Educational Research; *English Instruction; *Instructional Effectiveness; Instructional Improvement; *Learning Strategies; Peer Groups; Peer Teaching; *Secondary Education; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Collaborative Learning

ABSTRACT

This review of research on cooperative learning examines 19 journal articles and 5 microfiche documents that explicitly focus on the strategy as it applies to the instruction of English in the secondary grades. Observation of students, audio taping and analyzing student group conversations, and interviews with students and teachers are the methods of research most frequently employed. Case studies of individual classrooms and commentary from practicing teachers dominate the literature. In general, investigators distinctly favor the strategy as a successful method. Several sources that voice concerns or opposition to the majority are included but they are exceptions in the field. Although very little experimental research exists, that which does exist provides quality insight into the factors involved in successful implementation of the strategy. Great effort has been made to include the findings of the few empirical studies, specific to this strategies implementation, in the secondary English classroom. Contains 24 references. (Author)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 397 447

Cooperative Learning Strategy as Success Variable in Secondary English Instruction

A Review of Recent Literature

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND
DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL
HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
J. Melcher

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Jamey W. Melcher
Loyola College in Maryland
Baltimore, MD

CS215423

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Abstract

This review of research on cooperative learning examines nineteen journal articles and five microfiche documents that explicitly focus on the strategy as it applies to the instruction of English in the secondary grades. Observation of students, audio taping and analyzing student group conversations, and interviews with students and teachers are the methods of research most frequently employed. Case studies of individual classrooms and commentary from practicing teachers dominate the literature. In general, investigators distinctly favor the strategy as a successful method. Several sources that voice concerns or opposition to the majority are included but they are exceptions in the field. Although very little experimental research exists, those that do provide quality insight into the factors involved in successful implementation of the strategy. Great effort has been made to include the findings of the few empirical studies, specific to this strategies implementation, in the secondary English classroom.

The amount of current research on cooperative learning as a success variable in English instruction is prolific yet extremely varied in focus and methodology. The number of published articles on the strategy and its popular implementation in the classroom have coincided to form a trend, of near revolutionary proportion, in the field of education. Cooperative learning has become a multifarious term applicable to activities as diverse as student interaction on the internet, team teaching or co-teaching, student partnerships with one another and student group activities, to name only the relationships most frequently defined by this terminology. This review concentrates, although not exclusively, on studies conducted in the past ten years, that examine group activities, involving the interaction of more then two students in secondary English instruction. Following a brief discussion of the most prominent core research in the field of cooperative learning, the review will examine the sources that investigate its application to secondary English instruction. Within the section, cooperative learning in secondary English instruction, specific attention is given to the strategy's implementation as a method of writing instruction and as it is used to discuss and respond to literature. Contrasting opinions on the role of consensus and conflict in the classroom as they relate to cooperative learning, and finally, assessment problems associated with cooperative learning are reviewed.

Core Research on Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning strategies have been glowingly described as the key to producing a psychologically mature and healthy society by avid proponents Johnson and Johnson (1983). They report that peer interaction in childhood and adolescence is critical to social growth, increased productivity, understanding of values and development of a sense of autonomy. A number of researchers in the field note the human psychological needs, essential to maturation, that are effectively met through cooperative learning. Maltese (1991) references Hanna Arendt's theory of "spaces of appearances" to the same end that many others, including DiPardo & Freedman (1988) employ Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development", to espouse the benefits of a social, interactive approach to teaching children. Advocating the strategy, Livdahl (1993) cites

Vygotsky's theory that children learn all functions of personal development twice, first from social interaction and then on the individual level. There is an enormous amount of existing work, like Johnson and Johnson's (1983), claiming that cooperative learning will improve students' social psychological skills and therefore our future society. David Smit (1989), offers a critical stance relatively unique to the field. He questions the sweeping consequences often attributed to cooperative learning in the classroom and voices doubt that a particular pedagogical method could actually accomplish a more cooperative society or a more open view of knowledge.

Although the research investigating the social impact of this strategy is indeed interesting and extremely valuable in a more global sense, as educators the work that focuses on the efficacy of cooperative learning as a method of instruction is more practicable to us. Much of the early research published by Slavin, in the late 1970's and early 80's, concludes that peer group activities help students to reshape existing ideas, discover and retain new information better than individualized instructional methods (Webb, 1982). In their work specific to cooperative learning in the secondary English classroom, Lacey & Walker (1991) offer the conclusion that students, working with peers toward a common goal, are not only more likely to participate in the learning process but also generate creative ideas more frequently. Although this document concisely complies some of the prominent opinions favoring the strategy, including the investigators', and provides ample materials for teachers interested in its practical implementation, the results of actual classroom research are absent, in favor of detailed activities found to be successful by the researchers. Since the early investigators in this field began publishing their work, generally positive conclusions have dominated the literature. Findings indicate that peer groups provide students with an alternative classroom setting that more closely resembles society in general and encourages informal discussion, leading to critical and creative thinking processes and ultimately, higher student achievement.

Cooperative Learning in Secondary English Instruction

Nystrand, Gamoran and Heck (1992) conducted an empirical study, founded on a comprehensive theoretical rationale, of 54 ninth grade English classes. Through observation, recording time spent in cooperative learning activities, audio taping the classes and administering tests to assess achievement, their conclusions include the assertion that group work promotes higher order cognitive thinking skills. Nystrand and his associates are not alone in their claim that peer group activities in the English classroom also establish a sense of ownership. Numerous studies report students expressing feelings of attachment or ownership to the work and ideas produced in peer groups (Caroll, 1994; Jaccarino, 1993; Kaszycan & Kruger 1994). Cone's (1992) observations of twelfth grade English students, concur with these findings. She notes, when students are given cooperative learning tasks they assume responsibility for the product and even a sense of ownership for the curriculum itself. These conclusions are drawn from the researchers classroom experience as a teacher experimenting with the strategy. Her findings are presented as a personal reflection on how the implementation of cooperative learning effected her students of various ability levels. From her study of two ninth grade English classes (42 students total), Livdahl (1993) concludes that group discussion and writing projects not only foster ownership, which is widely acknowledged to be an integral component to student involvement and retention, but immerses the students even deeper into the material, creating opportunities to relate their personal knowledge and beliefs to new ideas. With the exception of the research by the Nystrand group, all of the other investigators have utilized relatively informal methods for their investigations and as observers/researchers often lack detachment from the students being studied. In the separate studies from Carroll and Livdahl, both collaborate with the classroom instructor and at times become involved with the teaching process or the students. The other literature examined here has been produced by teachers, primarily documenting their impressions on the strategy's success within their own classrooms.

Much of the current research establishes a correlation between the amount of structure dictated for the group activity and the level of achievement from the students. Nystrand and his

colleagues (1992) identify three types of cooperative learning groups: groups highly structured by the teacher performing what is defined as "collaborative seat work"; "problem solving" groups that come to some sort of consensus on a teacher defined problem; and "autonomous" groups that define and resolve the issues without direct teacher input. This study identifies only 11% of the group work observed to be "autonomous", while over 70% was labeled "collaborative seat work." In a valuable correlation of achievement to group type, the results show a lower rate of achievement for classes spending time in "collaborative seat work" compared to classes that had no cooperative learning time at all. Conversely, the achievement results for the few classes that participated in "autonomous" group activities were higher than the control class that did not use group work.

A variety of teachers/researchers express the importance of transferring responsibilities for teaching, learning and even curriculum choices from the teacher to the students through the use of cooperative learning. Most of these researchers advocate a revision in educators' perceptions of the classroom, from the traditional teacher directed model to a more student centered ideal (Cone, 1992; Jaccarino, 1993; Kaszyca & Krueger, 1994). In a study of tenth grade English student, group discussions, Smagorinsky and Fly (1994) agree with this popular opinion that teacher dominated groups are not effective. However, their results conclude that a certain degree of teacher modeling, like Bruner's theory of "scaffolding", is essential to productive group discussions. By audio taping student's as they discussed literature in a teacher-led setting and in small groups, then comparing and analyzing the transcripts, the investigators were able to develop a well founded hypothesis pertaining to success and failure of group work. Although this empirical investigation is aligned with a number of others, the student sample was extremely small and by the investigators own admission, generalized conclusions should be regarded cautiously. Not in complete opposition to those favoring a high degree of student autonomy in the classroom, but like Smagorinsky & Fly, a number of investigators stress the importance of well defined tasks and goals to the success of a cooperative learning activity (Hillebrand, 1994; Lacey & Walker, 1991; Reid, 1994).

The reality of classroom management problems make many teachers reluctant to relinquishing control of the classroom and is identified as a reason for the highly prescriptive collaborative activities that most research condemns as less effective and some, such as Nystrand's, report to cause decreasing achievement levels. Conversely, DiPardo & Freedman (1988) and more recently Livdahl (1993) report achievement results improving with the use of task oriented, highly structured group work. However, both of these researchers also note that this rigid, teacher dominated agenda is likely to erode development of ideas and positive student interaction that is, or should be, a primary objective of cooperative learning. The delicate balance between teacher control and student autonomy, and how achievement is reflective of the equilibrium, is a paradox of cooperative learning that has theorists supporting nearly every gradation of the murky spectrum.

Cooperative Learning as a Method of Writing Instruction

Implementation of writing groups, in which students compose, edit or respond to their peers' work, is reported to have a positive effect in establishing an interactive forum for student writing. Cooperative learning activities are specifically praised by researchers and writing instructors as an effective method for establishing a realistic sense of audience among young writers (Dale, 1994; Dipardo & Freedman, 1988; Mitchell, 1994). Although a sense of audience is widely regarded as important to the writer, when and how it is best developed, through cooperative learning, for the writing student is a point of some debate. Group writing workshops, that promote this type of knowledge, are viewed by some as ineffectual for the novice writer. Traditional skill based instruction, rather then cooperative learning methods that teach these "precursors" to good writing are considered more appropriate and beneficial to the secondary grade level, composition student (Smit, 1989).

In similar, single classroom studies, Dale (1994) and Hillebrand (1994) report that co-authoring requires the use of more planning and revising techniques throughout the project, when compared to individually composed work. Both investigators conclude that peer writing

groups effectively teach students to write in a non-linear format that closely resembles the pattern of successful, experienced writers. Dale conducted follow up interviews, eight months after the initial study, and reports that the planning and revising skills, developed through the student workshops, are retained at an excellent rate. However, like so much of the published research specific to cooperative learning in secondary English instruction, this investigator examined only one class for one grading term. Due to the small sample, the limited duration of the study and the short time elapsed before the follow up interviews were performed, the data on skill retention has very little universal significance.

Although the published literature is nearly unanimous in its acclaim of this strategy for successful writing instruction, a few exceptions are present. In her study of an eleventh grade composition class, Carroll (1994) concludes that cooperative writing groups often do not function in a manner that effectively promotes the desired skills. Through observation and student interviews she reports that the peer groups are often utilized as proof reading sessions rather than the creative exchange of ideas or the active revision of text. The research on cooperative writing groups consists primarily of studies that listen to student group conversations for brief periods of time and then evaluate the beneficial nature of these exchanges. When one writing assignment is produced by the entire group, the researchers often rely on student interviews to determine the accountability of all members. This methodology risks gathering biased or non-objective information from group members and is therefore more an insight to students' opinions about the activity rather then a measure of the strategies correlation to achievement.

Cooperative Learning as a Forum for Literature Discussions

"Literature contains many common aspects of humanity that we all grapple with at some point in our lives. What better way to make these issues come alive for students than to have them actively discussing them with their peers to create some end product?" (Lacey & Walker, 1991, p. 12). When an open exchange of ideas is the educational objective, many researchers agree that cooperative learning is at its best. Investigators, observing classrooms and interview-

ing students, report that peer discussion groups allow students to effectively relate existing knowledge to the new ideas presented in literature. Baloche and associates (1993) describe the relationship of cooperative learning theory with their own successful teaching experiences in a compilation of classroom narrative, teacher opinion and student reactions. They quote one eleventh grade English student who found group discussions to be "much more helpful" in promoting understanding when compared to teacher directed techniques. By discovering the meaningful themes themselves, as Jaccarino (1993) reports they do, rather then just hearing the information in a lecture format, the students become engaged and intrigued by the literature (Livdahl, 1993). The similar conclusions of these investigators is reflective of similar methodologies.
The referenced works of Baloche, Jaccarino and Livdahl are all written from the perspective of teachers reflecting on cooperative learning activities as a successful method for literature response.

In her study of literacy circles in Australian high school programs, Simpson (1994) observes the formation of risk and trust between group members. As common understandings are achieved, students feel a real sense of commitment to one another and to the text being studied. This strategy produces what Simpson calls a "community of readers", that is nonexistent when the entire class slowly works through the discussion of a novel. This investigation also leads her to claim that small group discussions are preferable for many students at this age range, who would be reluctant to volunteer their opinions in front of the whole class. In their observational study of three secondary literature classes, Baloche (1993) and her colleagues quote a teacher, who routinely utilizes cooperative learning strategies, noting its ability to encourage hesitant class participants. "No one wants to take public risks...however, if I group students, the result is miraculous" (p. 45).

In a year long study of an eleventh grade English class, Carroll (1994) observed the teacher change her instructional style, incorporating more cooperative peer workshops, ultimately, transforming the classroom from teacher centered to student centered. From interviews, with the teacher and the students, she reports a significant number of students with negative re-

sponses to the workshop format. Many of them specified their reluctance to discuss personal ideas with their peers, citing feelings of apprehension and embarrassment. They were concerned that other students did not take their opinions seriously and voiced their preference for the more traditional, teacher directed class format, even if the teacher was only able to spend a few minutes reviewing their works-in-progress. Michael McClure (1990), a secondary English teacher, addresses the strategy of peer workshop learning with mixed results. Employing cooperative learning groups as an alternative, offering reluctant students an audience more conducive to discourse, has often been unsuccessful in his experience. Students do not view their fellow group members as an authentic audience for their exchange of ideas but more like "fellow captives" who, in their eyes, have no credibility or authority with which to judge their work. Although Carroll indicates that reluctant students voice a preference for one on one, student to teacher discussion over the small group exchanges, neither she nor McClure report whether these students would be comfortable, active participants in the typical, whole class discussion. The majority of the literature, specific to cooperative learning as a method for encouraging student responses to literature, is produced by teachers examining the success of their own attempts with individual classes and with few exceptions they report positive results.

Consensus vs. Conflict

In the large body of cooperative learning advocates there is a rift concerning the strategy's objective in reference to encouraging conflict or achieving consensus between student members. The leading social psychological theorists argue that group discussions are of educational value, in part, because of the conflicting views and opinions that are expressed. Strategies that produce controversy result in increased cognitive reasoning and creativity among group members (Johnson & Johnson, 1979). From the pedagogic research, there is ample literature that concurs with this finding. Gibson (1992) reports that encouraging "dissensus" in the secondary English classroom, through the use of peer discussion groups, motivates students to write and think more creatively, more committedly and more convincingly.

Dipardo & Freedman (1988) cite respected researchers in the field, Bruffee and Wiener being the most prominent, who claim that the role of cooperative learning is to reach consensus or a product that represents, as nearly as possible, the collective ideas of the group. The role of cooperative learning is to encourage student groups to collaborate toward agreement and unity in accomplishing the assigned tasks. Even when the assignments do not explicitly require conformity of opinion by group members there is a natural tension leading to this end. Collaborative methods emphasis consensus thereby creating unnecessary peer pressure for students to suppress their individual differences and conform to the decisions of the group (Smit, 1989).

Few of these opposing theorists would disagree that conflict can indeed evolve into collaboration if the task is compelling enough. This controversy is centered less on the success of cooperative learning then on the theoretical factors contributing to its success.

The Problem of Assessment

Problematic for educators utilizing any instructional technique, the best mode for valid assessment of students' engaged in cooperative learning is often obscure and even impossible at times. A number of investigators address this topic, however, none present tangible solutions that are not contradicted by an equal amount of research. The essence of the dilemma is that the most valuable knowledge imparted to students through this pedagogic strategy is rarely demonstrated through an immediate product (Reid, 1994). In fact, the collaborative work may appear poor compared to individual assignments when student growth and learning is actually occurring at a level that is indiscernible from the assignment (Dale, 1994; Dipardo & Freedman 1988). In opposition to this view that significant didactic progress is indeed occurring even when written requirements may not reflect it, there are a few studies that find it likely that very little work or learning is actually going on in cooperative student groups. Furthermore, the teacher and even the observing researcher is generally unable to recognize with much certainty when the groups are functioning in a manner which promotes the desired educational goals. Group assignments

may easily shelter those students who do not read the material or contribute the required amount of effort to the final group product (Carroll, 1994).

There are those in the field, who maintain that students should be required to produce individual work while participating in the collaborative setting. Students, themselves, are often adverse to the prospect of being graded on the work, at least in part, of others (Brockman, 1994). For the purpose of accountability and assessment the successful cooperative learning structure must include student progress reports, journals and at best individual final products (Baloche, Mauger, Willis, Filinuk & Michalsky, 1993; Jobe, 1991). Research contrary to this call for student accountability, claims that the very nature of the individual requirement is antithetic to the core objectives of cooperative learning. The valuable, educative asset of this strategy is the creation of synergy within the group. Developed through interpersonal cooperation, students learn to exchange opinions, accept each others differences and contribute their own strengths to the assigned task. Individual accountability would destroy the need for student interaction and collaboration, hence, creative unity would never develop (Hillebrand, 1994). Although accountability and evaluation are necessary functions of our current educational system, the techniques employed must not hinder the strategy in practice. This is a serious issue in the field of cooperative learning that requires resolution through further research.

Conclusion

Although the bulk of research supports the use of cooperative learning as a successful strategy in secondary English instruction, a few recent studies express misgivings about its efficacy. Strong advocates have produced abundant research, making sweeping claims as to the positive didactic achievements and social psychological growth that the method fosters. Presented with a delicate balance of teacher support and student autonomy, the strategy has been credited with promoting a sense of student ownership of the curriculum and the assigned work. Cooperative learning in writing instruction has been most widely noted for its positive effect in developing a sense of audience for the student writer. An exiguous amount of research warns

that student writing groups often function like proof reading sessions rather then the desired, collaborative exchange of knowledge among peers.

Most of the investigators concur that cooperative learning creates a successful forum for thoughtful discussion of literature, although opposing views on the nature of these exchanges exist. There is a well balanced, yet obscure, division of theories, concerning whether student group discussions are beneficial due to their conflictive nature or because they encourage collaboration.

A vast amount of studies on cooperative learning has been produced by classroom teachers advocating the strategy or by investigators who merely observe a single classroom, interview the teacher and students and report on preferences and opinions. The dearth of empirical research, only two of the studies examined are truly quantitative in nature, may be, in part, due to the difficulty related to determining academic success, associated with the method. Many of the practitioners, favoring cooperative learning, stress educational achievements that are rather abstruse and difficult to measure through traditional testing devises. The few studies that have found trenchant methods to illuminate the specific areas of success or failure associated with cooperative learning activities are far too sparse in light of the almost revolutionary nature of the strategy. The advocation of cooperative learning is a call for the restructuring of the traditional classroom, from teacher directed education to student centered activities. In consideration of this monumental objective and the popular implementation the strategy, there is a need for greater experimental research that will distinctly define the areas of educative value resultant of cooperative learning in secondary English instruction.

Baloche, L., Mauger, M. L., Willis, T. M., Filinuk, J. R., & Michalsky, B. V. (1993). Fishbowls, creative controversy, talking chips: Exploring literature cooperatively. English Journal, 82 (6), 43-48.

Brockman, E. B. (1994). "English isn't a team sport, Mrs. Brockman": A response to Jeremy. English Journal, 83 (1), 60-61.

Carroll, P. S. (1994). Metamorphosis: One teacher's change/one class' reaction. English Journal, 83 (6), 22-28.

Cone, J. K. (1992). Untracking advanced placement English: Creating opportunity is not enough (Occasional Paper No. 30). Berkeley, CA: National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 353602)

Dale, H. (1994). Collaborative research on collaborative writing. English Journal, 83 (1), 66-70.

DiPardo A., & Freedman, S. W. (1988). Peer response groups in the writing classroom: Theoretic foundations and new directions. Review of Educational Research 58, 119-149.

Gibson, S. S. (1992). Faculty and Student Communities: The interactive contexts of teachers and learners. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, Louisville, KY. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 355 551)

Hillebrand, R. P. (1994). Control and cohesion: Collaborative learning and writing. English Journal, 83 (1), 71-74.

Jaccarino, V. (1993). What's in a new name? Collaborative learning and Shakespeare. English Journal, 82 (3), 64-66.

Jobe, L. G. (1991). Collaboration in the Classroom: Teaching the We-Search Paper. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, Indianapolis, IN. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 340 026)

Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1979). Conflict in the classroom: Controversy and learning. Review of Educational Research, 49, 51-70.

Johnson, D. W., & Johnson R. T. (1983). The socialization and achievement crises: Are cooperative learning experiences the solution? Applied Social Psychology Annual 4, 119-164.

Kaszyca, M. & Kruger A. M. (1994). Collaborative voices: Reflections on the I-Search project. English Journal, 83 (1), 63-65.

Lacey, A., & Walker, W. J. (1991). Using Small Group Work to Motivate English Students. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 332 224)

Livdahl, B. S. (1993). "To read it is to live it, different from just knowing it." Journal of Reading, 37 192-200.

Maltese, R. (1991). Three philosophical pillars that support collaborative learning. English Journal, 80 (5), 20-23.

McClure, M. F. (1990). Collaborative learning: Teacher's game or students' game? English Journal, 79 (2), 66-68.

Mitchell, D. (1994). Scripting for involvement and understanding. English Journal, 83 (6), 82-85.

Nystrand, M., Gamoran A., & Heck, M. J. (1992). Using Small Groups for Response to and Thinking about Literature. Madison, WI.: Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools. (ERIC Reproduction Services Center No. ED 342 011)

Reid, L. , Cintorino, M. A., Crews, W. M., & Sullivan, A. M. (1994). Making small groups work. English Journal, 83 (3), 59-63.

Simpson, A. (1994). Not the class novel: A different reading program. Journal of Reading, 38, 290-294.

Smagorinsky, P., & Fly, P. K. (1994). A new perspective on why small groups do and don't work. English Journal, 83 (3), 54-58.

Smit, D. W. (1989). Some difficulties with collaborative learning. Journal of Advanced Composition, 9, 45-59.

Webb, N. M. (1982). Student interaction and learning in small groups. Review of Educational Research, 52 421-445.